

# LutheranWoman

September 2010

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## THE BOOK OF FAITH

VOLUME 23 NUMBER 7 SEPTEMBER 2010

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VOICES

## The Book of Faith

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

**“For many of us, the** encounter with Scripture is limited to the excerpts that are read on Sunday morning. Many of us are biblically illiterate, unsure of how to engage Scripture.” I found this quote on the Book of Faith Web site, and for the most part I think it’s true. But for readers of this magazine, the Bible has been a trusted guide and friend for many years. Lutheran women have been doing Bible study for a long time.

I once had a conversation with an Episcopal priest I’d never met before. In the course of it, I mentioned this magazine. She was surprised and pleased. She told me that when she was cleaning out her mother’s home after her death, she found years worth of old *Lutheran Woman Today* magazines. When she looked through them, she saw her mother’s handwritten notes along the margins of the Bible study sessions.

In this issue, we begin our new Bible study, “The People of God: Unity in the Midst of Diversity,” by Jensen and Linda Johnson Seyenkulo. The study uses the four methods of reading the Bible that are part of the ELCA Book of Faith initiative. This session focuses on how we read the Bible and introduces us to the study methods we will use throughout the year. It promises to be an engaging, enriching journey.

In “A Friend Through Life’s Passages,” Sonia Solomonson writes, “I’m often reminded that life’s difficult experiences can be great teachers. But with the Bible as a friend through life, we move from milk to solid food.”

In “What I Learned in Sunday School,” author Kim L. Beckmann tells of how her understanding of the Bible has grown and changed since she was a little girl. She writes, “The Bible that cradles Christ challenges me with an inconvenient Jesus who has lots of opinions about wealth and preaches anything but a prosperity gospel. The inconvenient Jesus wants me to pray for enemies. He speaks of the rewards of following him—only to lead us to a cross.”

We know that it’s important read the Bible but where do we find the tools to do careful study? In “Learning to Read the Bible,” Kay Richter shares how her congregation has benefited from participating in the ELCA Book of Faith initiative. Pastor Richter says, “Amazing things happen among those who are studying the Bible at our congregation, Calvary Lutheran. Some folks who had drifted away from church are now actively participating in worship and other ministries.”

Amazing things are also happening through the ELCA’s work around the world. In “New Threads of Hope,” Audrey Novak Riley writes about how ELCA World Hunger is making a difference in the lives of children who are forced to work illegally in the rug-weaving and carpet industry. Through global partner GoodWeave, the children are rescued from terrible conditions and offered an education and a chance at new life. 🌿

**Kate Sprutta Elliott** is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You may write to her at [LWT@elca.org](mailto:LWT@elca.org).





GIVE US THIS DAY

## The Same Only Different

by Jan Erickson-Pearson

### My cousin Bev and I

were pregnant at the same time in 1992. I had a miscarriage, but she continued a healthy pregnancy and gave birth to a sweet little boy, Mark.

Next time I saw Bev, I was pregnant again already, and I was thrilled when my daughter Annika was born that August.

After Mark's birth, Bev and her husband, Tim, sent out a birth announcement that said something like this:

*Imagine that you have planned a trip to France. You have made careful preparations, learned everything there is to know about France. . . . Then you are on the airplane. Your dream is coming true. In a few short hours, you will land in France. Only you land in Belgium. And this is where you will stay. A lovely, country; not France, but interesting. You don't know Flemish and you have no map and, really, you're completely flustered. "What do we do in Belgium?"*

This letter announced the birth of their son, who has Down Syndrome.

Not what they were expecting. And, as they explained, "This is not a bad place we've landed, just not the one we planned for." Mark had a number of urgent health issues in his first years of life, and caring for him was all-consuming.

And so it has been now these 18 years.

Like Annika, Mark graduated from high school last May. It was a season of "lasts" for Bev and Tim and for us. His last high school football season, Mark was a manager for the varsity football team. His job was to run out on the field and collect the kicking tee.

People with Down Syndrome generally live somewhere along a continuum of capabilities. Mark does well in the Special Olympics where his parents so faithfully cheer him on. Bev told me that their goal for him before he graduated was that he be able to use a cell phone.

Bev wrote to me about "lasts," about how different it is for her family. In some ways, life will go on much as it has. Mark will continue to live at home. Bev is hopeful he will go on to a program that teaches life and job skills.

Bev wrote to me, "We're having a last school year with Mark, but we're on a different journey from your family. The positive thing is that we don't plan to send him off anytime soon and we have more time to enjoy him at home." It seems to me there were words to read between the lines.

Their confidence in God's unfailing loving kindness for them and for Mark, made in God's image, has made their lives rich and joyful.

Their "lasts" are the same, yet different from ours. They will be staying on in Belgium, a place they've found their way around skillfully.

Bev and I sat together in the bleachers when Mark's school played Annika's school last fall. I thought it was cool that Mark was out there being a manager for his school's team while Annika was on the opposite side, being a manager for hers. The same, only different. 🌸

Jan Erickson-Pearson developed the ELCA's resources and directed its strategy for responding to clergy sexual abuse.

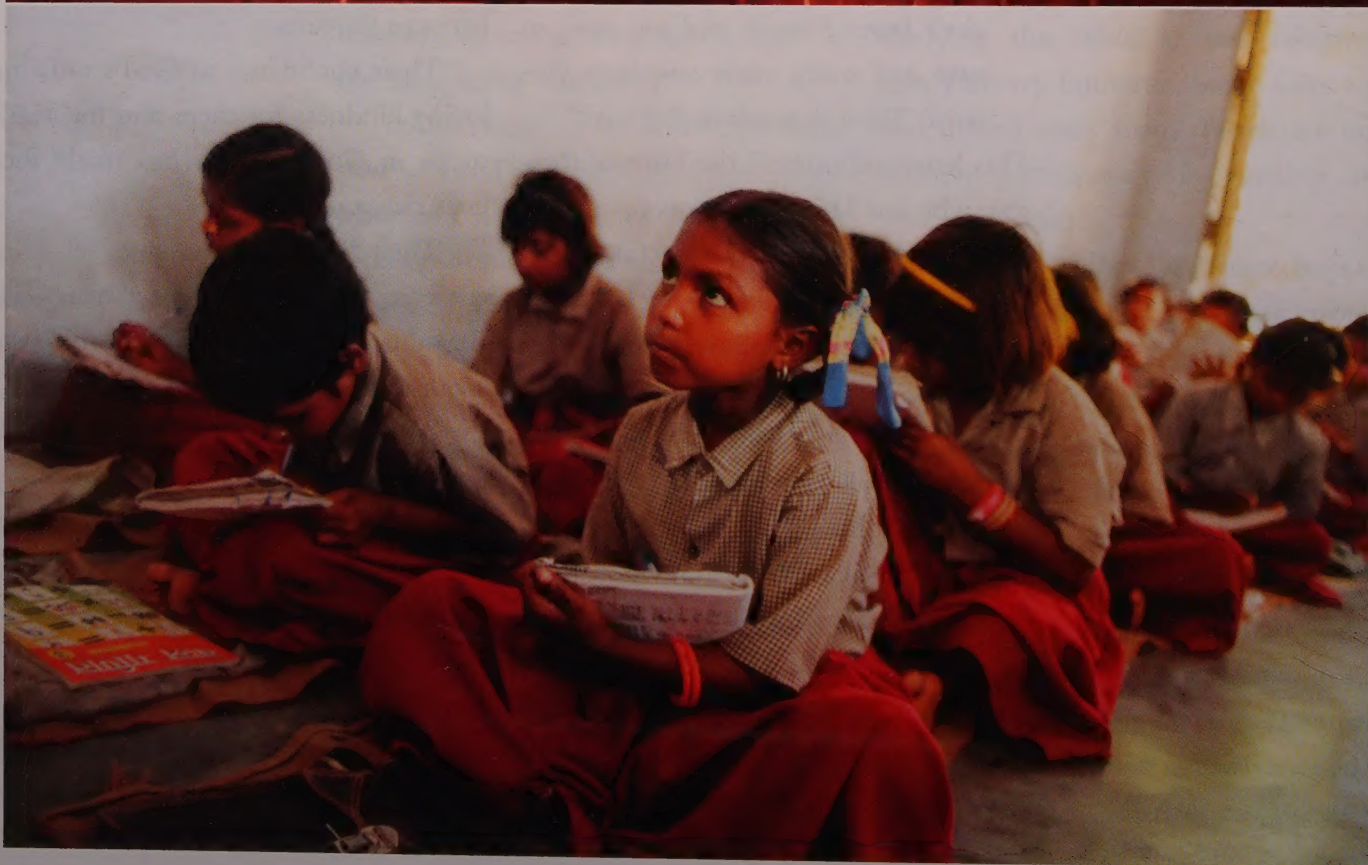
Women of the ELCA's 2008 Triennial Convention passed a resolution asking the organization to "take an active role in providing support for families of special needs children by offering a link on our Web site so those families can find support from other families and spiritual leaders." Go to [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) to learn more.





# New Threads of Hope

by Audrey Novak Riley





High in the mountains of Nepal, a classroom in Kathmandu echoes with the voices of children reciting their vocabulary words. An ordinary sound—but these aren't ordinary children. They're former "carpet kids," rescued from forced labor at the looms.

Sunita was one of those kids. She was only eight years old when she started working in a carpet factory to pay off her parents' debt to the village healer who had tried and failed to save her sister's life. Her desperately poor parents had no choice but to take their other children out of school and put them to work. When Sunita got to the city, she was put to work tying tiny knots by hand in intricately patterned rugs that would sell for thousands of dollars. A mistake would bring her a beating. Though she worked hard, bent over her loom for 18 hours every day in the hot, dusty factory, she earned only about a dollar a month. She could see no way out.

### BREAKING THE CYCLE

Child labor is illegal in Nepal, just as it is in most countries. But that doesn't stop unscrupulous factory owners or desperate villagers from putting children as young as four years old to work. Some such owners say that they need children's nimble hands and sharp eyes to make the best rugs, but in actuality,

the finest rugs are hand-knotted by experienced adults. Children are simply cheaper and easier to exploit.

The exploitation of a child worker doesn't end with the suffering of that child. Adult weavers' wages are driven down when it's cheaper for factory owners to put children to work. This combination of depressed wages for adults and shortened education for children means that poverty continues from generation to generation. Something has to break the cycle.

That *something* happened for Sunita. A GoodWeave inspector found her at her loom and brought her to one of the organization's rehabilitation centers for former child laborers. There she began living like a child again—going to school, playing with friends, exploring her dreams.

Sunita, now age 21, is studying accounting and English; she dreams of being a teacher. From carpet slave to college student!

### NEVER IN A CLASSROOM

GoodWeave, the organization that rescued Sunita, has freed thousands of children from servitude and has prevented the exploitation of hundreds of thousands more. A grant from ELCA World Hunger helps make GoodWeave's work possible. Founded in 1995, this nonprofit organization is dedicated to ending child labor in the carpet industry.

To that end, it sends out inspectors to factories and workshops all over South Asia. If an inspector determines that a child is being exploited, that child is offered a way out.

Former child workers are offered education through the equivalent of high school graduation. They can choose from either college-track studies or vocational programs, both of high quality.

Many graduates of GoodWeave-affiliated schools have gone on to the best universities in South Asia, as Laxmi has.

Laxmi was just six years old when she told the GoodWeave inspector she had to work to survive. Her family had moved from their village to Kathmandu after a landslide wiped out their home. Her mother had fallen ill and her father was squandering his small pay on drink, so little Laxmi went to work rolling rough woolen thread into balls for the weavers. Laxmi had never been inside a classroom when she was rescued in 1997, but she turned out to be an eager student. She graduated near the top of her class and is now making good grades at the top university in Nepal.

GoodWeave's vocational programs are popular paths to success as well. Man Maya was homeless and illiterate when she began working at the looms at the age of 10. She was rescued and started school; after seventh grade, she chose the



vocational track. She's now a successful seamstress back in her home village in Nepal.

In India, Raj Kumar had already been working at the looms for years when he was rescued in 1996. At Balashrya, a GoodWeave-affiliated school in India, he learned tailoring and was given a sewing machine as a graduation gift. He opened a shop in his home village and soon had a steady clientele—including GoodWeave, who hired him to make uniforms for the students at Balashrya. He has bought a second sewing machine and hired an assistant—and who knows what the future holds for Raj? He says, “Whenever I visit my friends, I give them courage and tell them they can do it too.”

## OUT OF POVERTY

Adult weavers' families and communities benefit from the good work of this organization as well. Day care and early childhood education centers give the youngest children safe

and healthy activities while their parents work. School sponsorships for older children, adult literacy programs, and health clinics promoted by GoodWeave contribute to better lives for carpet weavers and their families. And manufacturers are proud to put the GoodWeave label on their products.

Uma's parents work hard but still did not earn quite enough to afford their daughter's school fees, and she dropped out of the second grade. It would have been easy for her to go to work at the looms alongside her parents, but GoodWeave stepped in. With their sponsorship, she was able to return to school, where she has made her parents and friends proud.

Sunita, Raj, Laxmi, Man Maya, and Uma are only a few of the thousands of people in South Asia who have been empowered to lift themselves and their families out of poverty through the good work of GoodWeave.

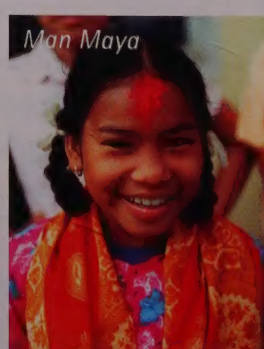
This organization's tireless and creative efforts to improve the lives of carpet weavers in South Asia have resulted in a sharp reduction in the number of children working illegally in the carpet industry. Children who otherwise would have been toiling in dim, dusty workshops and factories are now facing bright futures.

## ELCA WORLD HUNGER MAKES A DIFFERENCE

ELCA World Hunger fights hunger and poverty around the corner and around the world by addressing root causes through comprehensive programs of relief, sustainable development, education, and advocacy.

See [www.elca.org/hunger](http://www.elca.org/hunger) to learn more about the many ways ELCA World Hunger connects people to the resources they need to lift themselves out of poverty. 🌸

**Audrey Novak Riley**, formerly associate editor of this magazine, now serves ELCA World Hunger as assistant director.



You and your congregational unit can participate in this life-changing, life-saving work by making a gift to ELCA World Hunger through Women of the ELCA. Please make your check out to Women of the ELCA, write “ELCA World Hunger” on the memo line, and mail it to: Women of the ELCA, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694-1256; 100 percent of your donation will go to ELCA World Hunger. The carpet weavers and former child laborers of South Asia thank you.





LET US PRAY

## Words Beyond All Other Words

by Julie K. Ageson

Among the things I most treasure about Sunday worship is the reading and proclaiming of the weekly texts. Yes, there are times when my eyes glaze over and my mind wanders. But I look to these weekly encounters with Scripture for guidance and deeper meaning. As Scripture intended for the whole body of Christ, perhaps they carry a bit more weight?

Gathered together as the people of God, I imagine our collective concerns, hopes, and brokenness. Sometimes I feel the hurt of God's people gathered around the world: those searching for the basics of life, others caught up in the frenzy of the "fast lane." I imagine us as a great flock of fragile birds waiting with gaping beaks, hungry and thirsty for food and drink that will satisfy.

Telling the stories—reading the Bible together as the people of God—is a holy act. I imagine it to be prayer, the voices of God's people in one time and place speaking to God's people in another. I picture the past as a time of hunger and thirst just as the present reflects a world "longing for words that do not lie and symbols that can be relied upon . . ." (John Westerhoff in *Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle*).

At the heart of it is an encounter with a living God. I expect something more when the people of God gather around the word as a community. I hope for new insights, for words and images that will make me (and my community) take notice. I expect the biblical stories to make a difference.

These family stories that we read and proclaim together give shape and direction to our weekly gatherings. They become the focus, the fire around which we all come to warm ourselves and to make sense of our lives. They become a source of imagery that helps us to know a loving God who pursues us with persistence and unrelenting grace. They become words beyond all other words.

Wherever we gather, the biblical stories are at the heart of our identity as Christians. Creeds, songs, dramas, poetry, and stories are passed from one generation to another.

The riches of the biblical texts proclaimed bring us closer to God. They are life-giving and life-forming. As we pray the words of the Bible, may they truly become for each of us words beyond all other words!

"Two stories then—our own story and Jesus' story, and in the end perhaps, they are the same story . . . 'Cleave the wood, I am there,' says Isaiah in the Gospel of Thomas 'Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.' . . . To cleave the truth of our own lives, to lift and look beneath our own stories, is to see glimmers at least of [Jesus' life], of his struggling to come alive in our lives, his story whispering like a song through the babble and drone of ours." (Frederick Buechner in *A Room Called Remember*) 🌿

**Julie K. Ageson** is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.





## CALENDAR NOTES

# September

*compiled by Audrey Novak Riley from sources including the Lutheran Study Bible, Evangelical Lutheran Worship, and Sundays and Seasons, published by Augsburg Fortress, Publishers ([www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org)).*

In September, the lectionary readings tell us a lot about what wealth means in the life of a disciple. Money's always a touchy subject! Are we ready to hear what Jesus says about it?

### 5 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel to think hard about what it means to be his disciple. He wants thoughtful disciples, people who've considered what they might have to give up—yet are still willing to stick with him. The passages appointed for today are Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Psalm 1; *or* Jeremiah 18:1–11; Psalm 139:1–6; Philemon 1–21; Luke 14:25–33.

### 6 Labor Day

The ELCA's 1999 social statement on the economic life, "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All" holds plenty of wisdom to ponder on this Labor Day (download it and a study guide from [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)). How do you define what a good job is? What makes it good? For whom?

### 12 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Today's texts show us mercy from several angles. In the Exodus reading, Moses intercedes for the people (who had certainly stirred up some divine wrath) and gains God's mercy for them. In the text from Timothy, we hear a heartfelt cry of gratitude for God's mercy. And in the Gospel, Jesus tells us what goes on behind the scenes when a sinner repents and receives God's mercy: The

angels rejoice. Today's texts are Exodus 32:7–14; Psalm 51:1–10; *or* Jeremiah 4:11–12, 22–28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12–17; Luke 15:1–10.

### 14 Holy Cross Day

On this date in the year 355, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was dedicated. It has been added to and rebuilt many times since then, but it still stands in the Old City.

The custom of making the sign of the cross (either the little cross on the forehead or the big cross from head to heart and shoulder to shoulder) is very old. In the year 211, the Roman writer Tertullian said that Christians seldom do anything significant without making the sign of the cross. Martin Luther recommended that Christians begin and end each day with it. How many times do you make the sign of the cross each day? Each time, you're calling on the creating, saving, life-giving God to whom you (we!) belong. The passages for today are Numbers 21:4b–9; Psalm 98:1–4 *or* Psalm 78:1–2, 34–38; 1 Corinthians 1:18–24; John 3:13–17.

### 19 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Today's Gospel is a puzzler. Jesus isn't really telling us to act like the embezzling manager, is he? Well, let's look closer. What does the manager do when the crisis is upon him? He forgives debts. He forgives for his own selfish reasons, but he does forgive. Maybe one point of the story is that there's never a wrong reason to forgive our debtors as



our debts have been forgiven us. What do you think? The passages appointed for today are Amos 8:4–7; Psalm 113; or Jeremiah 8:18–9:1; Psalm 79:1–9; 1 Timothy 2:1–7; Luke 16:1–13.

## 21 Matthew, Apostle

In Jesus' day, tax collectors, such as Matthew, were scorned as traitors and collaborators with the hated Roman occupiers. So how could such a person become one of Jesus' trusted 12? And how could such a person get along with another apostle, Simon the Zealot? His fiercely nationalist point of view would have been completely opposite Matthew's. I imagine the presence of Jesus had a lot to do with it. What does this tell us about our own relationships with fellow Christians whose politics we dislike? The texts appointed for Matthew's day are Ezekiel 2:8–3:11; Psalm 119:33–40; Ephesians 2:4–10; Matthew 9:9–13.

## 26 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Today Jesus tells us the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (not Mary and Martha's brother; another Lazarus). When Jesus told the story, most of his hearers probably identified with poor Lazarus. Today, though, we probably identify with the rich man. (Type your annual income into the box on [www.globalrichlist.com](http://www.globalrichlist.com) to see just how rich you are.) The story never tells us that the rich man was cruel or greedy. He ignored the beggar at his doorstep—but we who live in cities ignore panhandlers every day. Our rich man isn't any worse



*"St. Matthew and The Angel" by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn*

than the rest of us. So how come he ends up in Hades? Because he ignored the suffering of his brother Lazarus. What does that tell us about our own responsibility to the poor? Today's texts are Amos 6:1a, 4–7; Psalm 146; or Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15; Psalm 91:1–6, 14–16; 1 Timothy 6:6–19; Luke 16:19–31.

## 29 Michael and All Angels

Angels are God's messengers to human beings, and their messages almost always start off with "Don't be afraid." Artists often depict them as slender girls or chubby children; in Scripture, they more often appear as men. The earliest known Christian depiction of an angel is in the Catacomb of Priscilla under the city of Rome, which dates back to the second century. The texts for today are Daniel 10:10–14, 12:1–3; Psalm 103:1–5, 20–22; Revelation 12:7–12; Luke 10:17–20. 🌿

**Audrey Novak Riley** is assistant director for ELCA World Hunger and Disaster Appeal.



# LEARNING TO READ THE BIBLE

by Kay Richter



*Editor's note: The Rev. Kay Richter is pastor at Calvary Lutheran, Two Rivers, Wis. This congregation has been living into the ELCA Book of Faith initiative for three years. Pastor Richter describes the advantages and challenges of being a Book of Faith congregation.*

The Bible, our first language of faith, can be a powerful force in the lives of Christians. Amazing things happen among those who are studying the Bible at our congregation, Calvary Lutheran. Some folks who had drifted away from church are now actively participating in worship and other ministries.

The Sunday school grandpa is a good example. He had gotten caught up in the stress of running a business and church had slipped away from him for a few years. He's back—and in a BIG way! Now he shares his musical talents in worship and Sunday school, participates in the Book of Faith Ephesians study,



and passes along his excitement and energy to others who are struggling with tough times.

He told us of a day when an opportunity to be a witness to his faith came up on a job site. "The words just came out," he said. "I don't know where they came from. I've never done anything like that before. I wouldn't have thought about doing that! But I told them about Jesus and that he had died for our sins. Wow! It was awesome."

### Bringing Bible Study to the People

"The Book of Faith initiative is everything your congregation does to get people to read the Bible. It's an initiative, not a program," Darlene Kalfahs, our synod's Book of Faith advocate, reminds us. Based on that description, Calvary has a lot of Book of Faith activities.

We began the initiative even before Book of Faith resources were published. Our education planners were struggling to find ways to bring adults into Bible studies. It seemed the same 10 people would show up, even if we did three different studies a week. Those folks would come to all of them—but no one new would join.

One of the Book of Faith suggestions is to bring Bible study to the people when they are already at congregational events or are in the building for another program. When is the largest group of adults

gathered in the building? Worship, of course! The education leaders asked our worship planners if they could bring Bible study to worship. They agreed. So we began the "Walk through the Bible Sermon Series."

Instead of doing the listed lectionary readings, we began with Genesis 1 and will end with Revelation 27. My sermons reflect on a central story or passage paired with a Gospel reading on the same topic. Some connections are easy, such as the commandment about not committing adultery paired with Jesus and the crowd that wanted to stone the woman caught in adultery. Some are a bit more obscure, such as the fall of Jericho paired with Zaccheus. (Zaccheus lives in Jericho after the city had been rebuilt.)

I choose the pairs of texts and make suggestions for hymns that will fit the theme each week. The worship planners review my hymn selections. At times, a hymn of the month is chosen because it ties in with several Bible passages. By singing these hymns every week for a month, the congregation learns them, an added bonus of the sermon series. We return to the Common Lectionary for the major festivals: Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Week, Easter, Reformation Day, and All Saints' Day. Sometimes the walk through text fits the festival day really well, so we use that rather than the assigned texts for the day.

### Making Connections

The greatest benefits of bringing the Bible study into worship are the connections that people make between biblical events and texts. For example, Holy Week services took on new meaning for many in the congregation after we learned about the Exodus and the beginnings of Passover. Hearing Jesus reinterpret the commandments about murder and adultery gave members new insights into and perspectives on those commandments and other teachings in the Torah. Several times I've heard people comment, "I didn't know that was in the Bible." Even the people who know the Bible really well are learning new things—including myself.

I was surprised to discover that the phrase "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" was not originally used to punish a guilty person in accord with the harm he or she had caused. Rather, it was used to punish a false witness who brought charges against someone else with false testimony. The command was more on the lines of: "Give that person the punishment they tried to impose by false charges. It will eliminate the temptation to testify falsely or to try to convict someone of something they did not do."

Our Sunday school, two-thirds of whom are five years old or younger, is using the Spark Story Bible and curriculum. Our Sunday



school director, Dana Arneman, has said that the children love the bright colors and bold pictures in the Spark Bible. The curriculum is used rotationally, so that students—using crafts, cooking, science experiments, music, and other activities—study the same lesson over several weeks.

This model is also helpful because some students are in joint custody arrangements, attending Sunday school every other weekend. The Spark curriculum offers many activities for parents to become involved in the Sunday school with their children.

### Starting Young

As a part of the education ministry, children are given a Bible when they enter the third grade. We are currently using *The Learning Bible*, which was published by Augsburg Fortress, but is now out of print. (We stocked up so we could continue using it for a while.) The Contemporary English Version is a wonderful translation for children as they are learning to read and improving their reading skills.

They are encouraged to bring their Bibles with them each week, study the Bible stories during class, and continue the reading at home. When those students move into first communion classes and confirmation, they have some experience with their Bibles. Confirmation takes them further along the path

to learning the Bible. We've had a few adults who decided to purchase this study Bible for themselves after working with Confirmation or Sunday school students and finding the study notes in the margins helpful for their continued study.

### Reaching Out

When Augsburg Fortress's Book of Faith Ning social networking site was created, Calvary was already signed up as a Book of Faith congregation. The congregation members jumped into using the site right away. I and several members have our own profiles, and we have groups for Calvary, for Calvary's confirmation class, and for a "Read through the Bible in a Year" discussion.

The confirmation group idea came about when one of our confirmation students was recovering from back surgery and was unable to come to classes. We decided to try out an online classroom. The student joined the group, our confirmation group leader joined, and I invited other teens to join the conversation, too. I posted lessons and worksheets from the "Here We Stand" confirmation curriculum on the site, starting a new conversation within the confirmation group for each lesson.

The home-bound student would do the lessons, answer the questions, and post his answers on the site. Then I would respond or we

would get a conversation going. It wasn't ideal, but it helped him keep up with the study so that when he returned to classes he didn't have too much catching up to do.

### Using Web-based Media

The "Read through the Bible in a Year" group on Ning started as our education leaders proposed some new opportunities for members to dig into the Bible. I put together a daily reading list and published it in a little take-home booklet and weekly in the bulletin announcements. Since it was an ambitious commitment, there were only two people who signed up to participate. One was also actively leading other studies at Calvary at that time. The other had to pull out due to some health concerns, so we only made it about halfway through the year. But the discussions were lively.

Some folks from outside the congregation found the group as they were searching the Book of Faith Web site and joined or listened in. I'm hoping that we will get back to that set of readings some day!

Our synod, the East Central Synod of Wisconsin, also has a group on the Book of Faith site and their Eastern Lay School of Ministry started a site, too, with space for discussions of the classes that they offered. As an instructor at the Lay School, I posted lesson plans and reading helps on the conversation



boards. Students are welcome to come and chat, ask questions, or talk about their assigned readings.

### Bible Study Making a Difference

When the Book of Faith resources were published, we used one of the studies in an existing Bible study group. As we work through the study of Ephesians, we find that the group has more questions than a one-hour lesson will allow. So we're taking our time going through the study, spending two or three one-hour sessions on each of the lessons. We have two other active Bible study groups among adults. One meets at the church and is reading through the Letter to the Romans with the help of a study guide. The

other meets in the homes of the participants and is getting started on a new topic—theology of the cross.

It's great to see 15 to 20 people involved in those studies. One of the participants, a spry 80-something-year-old summed up the benefits of these classes. "I want you to know how much of a difference these classes are making for me, how my attitude has changed, how my perspective has changed—and how I treat others in my daily life," she

said. "I've learned so much! These discussions have made me more aware of the little things I need to work on in my life." This is a woman who has been a pillar of our congregation for many years. Hers is high praise for what studying the Bible can do in a person's life.

As Sunday school grandpa said, "Wow! It is awesome!" 🌿

**The Rev. Kay Richter** serves as pastor at Calvary Lutheran Church, Two Rivers, Wis.

### GET STARTED

Go to the Book of Faith Web site at [www.bookoffaith.org](http://www.bookoffaith.org) to learn more about the initiative. Join the conversation with others who are committed to learning more about the Bible by joining the Book of Faith's social network at <http://bookoffaith.ning.com>.

## Which of these were considered "Clean Food" for the Israelites?

- A. Locusts
- B. Katydid
- C. Crickets
- D. Grasshoppers

Find out this and more at:

[bookoffaith.org/question](http://bookoffaith.org/question)  
or look it up in *Leviticus 11*

  
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 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America





HEALTH WISE

## The Miracle of Meditation

by Molly M. Ginty

### Without thinking, Julia

Banks has cured her high blood pressure.

“That’s the secret to it—not thinking,” says Banks, 79, a retired Milwaukee nurse who attributes her improved health to clearing her mind during meditation practice. “For 20 minutes, twice a day, I take time to get quiet and release my thoughts, which leaves me so relaxed that my blood pressure is now that of a healthy woman who is a quarter my age.”

Banks discovered meditation a decade ago, when she was part of a Medical College of Wisconsin study that found people with heart problems can cut their risk of strokes and heart attacks in half if they meditate regularly.

Ever since, Banks has stuck with the routine she learned from researchers, taking time every morning and evening to close her eyes and focus on spiritual affirmation. As a result, she has not only averted heart trouble, but addressed the anxiety that used to grip her when she was “taking on everybody else’s problems” and shed the 75 pounds she gained because she was “eating without paying attention to the body’s needs.”

Stories of radical transformations like these are becoming more common as a growing body of scientific evidence proves that meditation—sitting quietly with your thoughts, breath, or prayers—can help you ward off not only high blood pressure, anxiety, and weight gain, but also depression, diabetes, insomnia, and a slew of other ailments.

“Meditation helps and heals your whole body,” says Dr. Carolyn King,

Ph.D., who received the first federal grant to study meditation in 1991 and who continues to research it today at Maharishi University in Fairfield, Iowa. “Even better, it can have a profound effect on your spirit and your mind.”

Why join the 10 percent of Americans who have tried meditation?

Number one, it benefits your brain. During meditation, the mind drifts into a state of “restful alertness” that reduces stress. Activity increases in the frontal and parietal cortices, two areas of the brain that are involved in attention. Creativity, memory, and productivity improve—and some studies show IQ does too.

Number two, it’s a boon for your body. Since 1970—when an Indian monk named Swami Rama stunned researchers at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, by voluntarily changing his heart rate through meditation—scientists have discovered that meditation can not only lower your heart rate, but can decrease your respiratory rate and reduce the accumulation of waste products such as carbon dioxide and lactic acid. Research shows meditation can slow aging, reduce hardening of the arteries, improve immune function, and ease asthma, allergies, arthritis, epilepsy, headaches, substance abuse, stomach problems, and the symptoms of menopause.

On top of all these benefits, meditating regularly has a third advantage: improving your social interactions. The type of brain activity involved in meditation is associated with greater levels of happiness, more flexibility in outlook,

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This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) for more information.



and a decreased tendency to get angry or flustered. Since meditation reduces stress hormones, since it floods you with natural painkillers called endorphins, and since it lowers anxiety and eases depression, it can make you calmer, more patient, and more generous toward others.

“Meditation helps you become more composed and less reactive,” says Maureen Stewart, a senior instructor at the Vipassana Meditation Center in Shelburne, Mass. “And this takes the emotional suffering out of potentially painful situations.”

All told, meditation’s positive effects are so great that more than 200 universities and research centers in the United States have studied it. The National Institutes of Health has awarded more than \$24 million to research its wide-ranging benefits.

If you want to start a regular meditation practice, where do you begin?

Take a comfortable seat (on the floor, in a chair, or wherever you feel most at ease), get quiet, and let your own needs take it from there. Different types of meditation work best for different people, so experts say it’s best to experiment with a variety of approaches before settling on one.

“Some people stick with one style, always focusing their gaze on an object, always tuning into their breath, or always practicing for a set amount of time at a set time of day,” says Donna Nowak, former director of the American Holistic Medical Association. “Then

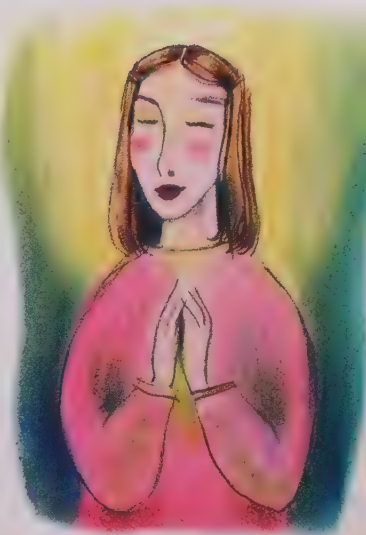
there are people like me, who need variety. I can meditate for 10 minutes or 30, in silence or with music, alone at home or with my church’s meditation group. How and when I practice all depends on what my body, mind, and soul need at that particular moment.”

As you experiment with different forms of meditation, know there is a wide range of disciplines you can try. Transcendental meditation, the type that Julia Banks practices, involves closing the eyes and quietly repeating a spiritual affirmation for 20 minutes, twice a day. Another method of meditation involves closing the eyes, clearing the mind, and focusing on bodily sensations—ideally for one hour in the morning and one in the evening. In another type of meditation, you open your eyes, focus your gaze softly, and breathe slowly. Whenever your thoughts start to wander, you bring your awareness back to your breath, meditating for whatever stretch of time seems best for you that day.

No matter what style of practice you choose, those who meditate say you can expect it to have positive effects on your life and other people’s lives, too.

“I’ve been blessed to have a steady meditation practice for 35 years,” says Mary Wolken, director of the Complementary Medicine Association. “As a result, I’m more present to every moment, more peaceful in myself, and more effective in helping others.” 🌸

**Molly Ginty** lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Women’s eNews*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Ms*.



For more information:

Women of the ELCA resource on  
“Sacred Spaces” [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org)  
(click on our newest program resources)

National Center for Complementary  
and Alternative Medicine “Meditation: An  
Introduction” <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/meditation>





# What I Learned in Sunday School

*(and What I Didn't)*

by Kim L. Beckmann

If we have to choose between milk or the solid food of spiritual nourishment, we might pick the softness of comfort food (1 Corinthians 3:2).

But we would do well to learn to love the texture of solid food that comes with a discipleship diet. Here's what I learned in Sunday school—and what I didn't.

## I LEARNED TO LOVE JESUS

Melina would sit on the altar steps gazing into the manger. I've never seen a child so still on Christmas Eve. The baby Jesus was just a doll with unruly synthetic hair, wrapped in a worn receiving blanket, placed in a

homemade crib. But for Melina it was baby Jesus, and she adored him.

In Sunday school, I learned that same wonder of finding Jesus in Luke 2. Later, it was attributed to my eyesight but I would lay my cheek right in the book to read those breathless words: "And they found Mary, and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger." The sweet milky smell of the newborn Jesus was less hay and donkey, more binding glue and ink. Cheek cradled





in the words, I learned to love the Word. In that very basic way you only grasp as a child, I learned, as Martin Luther said, that the Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.

I wanted my own brand-new Bible, and earned one by selling boxes of greeting cards. The new Bible had red letters, and a ribbon marker. But it was a Revised Standard Version. Who knew the word didn't come down to us in Elizabethan English? The birth of the sav-

ior didn't smell the same with fresh ink and new glue. Sunday school hadn't prepared me for my Jesus to come in a different package, not even a slightly different package.

Eventually, I got glasses. I still like the story of the babe lying in the manger best in the King James' version. I know it by heart. But I began to be able to see God and love Jesus less narrowly.

I grew in appreciation for other translations, original languages, and

contemporary-language versions like *The Message*. They cast different lights on words and stories I thought I knew. A visit to the Holy Land got me interested in peeling back layers of history and culture to get as close in meaning and context as possible, to keep my nose in the book as a living word.

Sometimes I came to love Jesus more through people different than me. Like Jewish friends who honored Shabbat. Bible study at the rehab center cast new light on Esau's selling his birthright for a bowl of soup. There was a blind African American octogenarian who cooked for our soup kitchen by touch. She offered faith and wisdom when gunfire erupted in our neighborhood: "Don't worry, child, trust Jesus... and stay away from the windows."

Melina's pure adoration of a child in a manger stays with me. But I like that her Jesus had untamed hair. You don't need to read much further before you hear Jesus sing in the key of his mother's *Magnificat* of God's disruption of the accepted order (Luke 1:46-55).

The Bible that cradles Christ challenges me with an inconvenient Jesus who has lots of opinions about wealth and preaches anything but a prosperity gospel. The inconvenient Jesus wants me to pray for enemies. He speaks of the rewards of following him—only to lead us to a cross.



The Bible challenges me with an inconsistent Jesus who associates with social climbers, ne'er-do-wells, and outsiders alike, who talks about both open arms and narrow gates, sits with a betrayer at the table, says the first will be last and the last first, but also tells a story about a banquet hall door closed to latecomers. Then he calls us all to supper together and expects it to work out. It's times like this that I pull up a seat next to Melina and invite others that love Jesus to join us, to lay our cheeks on the page, breathe deeply, and gaze together into the manger.

### I LEARNED TO LOVE THE STORIES

"In the beginning..." But even before the beginning, there was God. What would earth look like without form, empty of life? If a wind from God was moving over the face of the inky deep, was that really nothing?

Long before I could read my own Bible, in Sunday school there were stories. Fabulous stories! Sun, moon, and stars were set in the sky. The earth filled up with color and variety. A human was lonely and a companion was born out of his own body. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights. Noah and the animals lived in an ark until the rainbow came out. Joseph had dreams. Jonah sailed away from God, got tossed into the ocean by a frightened sea

captain, and rescued by a whale. The angel of death passed over doorposts painted with blood. The people walked into the desert with whatever they could carry, and God sent them bread from heaven.

I heard that three brave boys loved God, refused the idolatrous order of powerful authorities, walked around in the blazing furnace with an angel, and never even got singed. Gideon defeated the myriad Midianites with a fraction of his torch-bearing army, so all would know that God's power, not military might, re-established freedom and justice.

I learned that parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings. The world of the gospel stories doesn't always look like our world. The poor are blessed. Jesus walks on water and stills a storm. He changes water into wine. He raises Lazarus and a little girl from the dead but we're still surprised when only Jesus' grave clothes are left in the tomb. He's taken up into heaven and disciples start raising people to life. They're thrown in prison but are found outside preaching, with the prison door still locked.

In Sunday school I learned God makes a way out of no way. Life shows up where life shouldn't be possible. In the desert. In aged and virgin wombs. Out of cold tombs.

How can any of this be? Recently I saw someone had scratched

"a million years" off a roadside geological marker. Some readers of the Bible don't think that timeline squares with a seven-day creation. In college I read several theories "explaining" the miracles out of enlightened embarrassment (a reed path in the Red Sea, rocks in the sea of Galilee) as though the explanations were more believable.

By natural processes, human agency, or divine intervention, to me it's all God making a way, bringing life.

Hearing that Isaiah might be three different Isaiahs, that there may be four different contributors to Genesis, and two different creation stories didn't trouble me. The stories standing together gave shape to what I'd instinctively understood in my love for these stories: There's meant to be room in them for different perspectives and expressions of a multifaceted God eager to be known and finally unknowable, at the same time.

I live that paradox of reason and faith. In Sunday school I learned I was a good leader. At confirmation, I discovered as a female member I would not be allowed to lead in certain ways. The explanation was "orders of creation." Man created first, woman for helping roles, God had ordained what Paul later affirmed as good order. Women's silence and subordination in church.



For the formative portion of my life, Lutherans agreed that the Bible and tradition made it impossible for me to serve as an ordained pastor. Somewhere in the middle of my story, though, Lutherans diverged. In reading Scripture some of us were willing to allow for the call I was experiencing personally. Others didn't see this in their reading of the Bible.

Had God always meant for women to be fully franchised? Had we been wrong before? Did male-only ordination make sense at one time, but now God was leading us in a new direction? Were we caving in to culture in error? Was God's Spirit doing a totally new thing? I don't know. But I believe the God who makes a way out of no way, for whom nothing is impossible, who could make stones cry out, could ordain even me for the sake of the gospel.

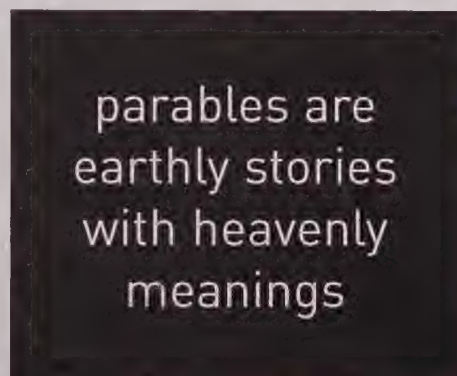
### I LEARNED TO LOVE THE PICTURES

A stained-glass "life of Christ" encircled the church of my youth, with a whimsical Jacob's ladder on the balcony stairs. In the altar painting at my grandfather's church, Jesus extended a hand to a sinking Peter. In the congregation I served, Jesus knocks on the door of the heart.

If I say "Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane," my guess is you see Jesus kneeling with praying hands, a shaft of light streaming from heaven into a dark night of the soul.

An elderly man near death once wished for one more visit to church to see this image that had sustained so many trials.

Such images are touchstones for our faith. But Wendy had never been to Sunday school when she drew this scene for the confirmation class quilt: Her Jesus, praying joyfully with hands upraised to heaven, looked a lot like me at the altar! A sun shone from the corner. Jesus was standing in a carrot patch.



Wendy's drawing was "milk" but I could wish to have as fresh an outlook. Though Genesis tells us the image of God is male and female, and despite the meaty range of images for God in Scripture—mother hen, laboring woman, nursing mother, a sewing, cooking, cleaning God—the God in my head is always male. I see the King, Judge, Father, the white-haired, white, powerful man of my Sunday school leaflets. Biblical descriptions that stretch our ability to see God's image in one another across differences is one way to get into the meat of faith formation and discipleship.

### I LEARNED TO SHOW UP

In my mother's things, I found a stack of certificates for perfect Sunday school attendance. My sister still wears her five-year pin. We learned that the discipline of showing up has rewards! A former confirmand stopped me on the street furious that what he learned in Sunday school had not stood up to adult challenges and didn't prepare him for real life. I wondered if he would ever dream of still getting into the clothes he wore to Sunday school. I wondered if the failure wasn't in the milk.

Maybe we failed him by not inspiring a discipline of meeting at the cradle of Christ, a discipline that didn't flake off like glitter on a Christmas pageant's angel wings in the winds of January. Kids in fifth grade felt they were too old for Sunday school. Did we need more courage in weaning them from milk to solid foods to sustain life-long discipleship as adults eager to chew? There are rewards and graces for showing up to whatever God wants to do next in our lives and the life of this world. Pull up a chair. Join Melina and me and the babe with unruly hair as we grow together. 🌿

**The Rev. Dr. Kim L. Beckmann** is an ELCA pastor. She is a recent contributor to *New Proclamation Commentary* and author of *Prepare a Road! Preaching Vocation, Community Voice, Marketplace Vision*. She lives in Chicago with her husband, also an ELCA pastor.



# A FRIEND

## THROUGH LIFE'S PASSAGES

*by Sonia C. Solomonsen*





*"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, ...Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you..." —Isaiah 43:2-4*

THE IMAGE IS STRONG. I CAN STILL SEE HER SITTING EACH MORNING IN HER LIVING ROOM CHAIR, BIBLE IN HAND, WITH HER LADIES AID (AS IT WAS CALLED IN THOSE DAYS) OR WOMEN'S CIRCLE BIBLE STUDY GUIDE.

Yes, for my mother, Bible reading was a daily part of life—as important as breathing or preparing meals for her family. I have no doubt that the Bible was Mom's friend. Her friendships were focused in her congregational women's group. Farm life in the '40s and '50s was sometimes isolating. Women didn't meet at Starbucks for coffee, go out for lunch, gather at the spa for pedicures, or enjoy a weekend getaway for gals. Their friends were the women in their Ladies Aid and circle groups; they shared their lives at the monthly meetings and other church functions.

More vivid memories remain from my childhood. I remember the evenings too: After my father came in from the fields and farm chores, we had supper and then my parents, two siblings, and I gathered for

Bible reading and family devotions. Our days were framed with prayer and Bible reading. Only years later did I realize the importance of that foundation.

Fast forward a few decades. Add another image, this time of one of my granddaughters, age 9. When I visit my oldest son's family and I help tuck Olivia into bed at night, one of my delights is having her pull out her Bible (it includes reflection questions for young girls), read aloud one or two chapters, and discuss some of the questions before she says her prayers. Already the Bible is becoming her friend. She's learning how to make application to her life from what she learns in her Bible reading.

Two different images. Two different ages. But the foundation of Bible reading weaves a thread that

stretches from great-grandmother to great-granddaughter.

For me, as the daughter of one and grandmother of the other, that foundation remains firm. That doesn't mean the path has been linear and easy, however.

### Having a Context

I remember at some stage in my young life—was it as a teen or pre-teen? I don't recall exactly—having a card tucked into my Bible that I must have received either in confirmation class or in what was then known as Luther League. The card listed Bible verses for different situations. Are you lonely? Read this verse. Are you discouraged? Read that verse. And so on. I remember using that card frequently and, at that stage in my spiritual journey, it was very helpful.

That doesn't work so much for me anymore. While some verses continually draw me back (Isaiah 43:1-5 is a particular favorite of mine) or are comforting to me, it is more important for me now to have



the context for a verse. I need more than just a single verse. I want to know why that verse is there. What does it mean? What came before? What comes after? What is this section telling me about the God who loves me so deeply, about this Jesus who is my friend and Savior? How does it deepen my relationship with them? And the stories are important—seeing God’s presence in the lives of the people in the Bible, just as I see God’s presence in my life.

That is perhaps what’s suggested in the 1 Corinthians text about milk and solid food (3:2). As Pastors Jensen and Linda Johnson Seyenkulo point out in the Bible study, what we learned as beginners in the faith serves as an important foundation. That’s the milk of faith. “But there comes a time when we have to switch to solid food,” they remind us.

For some of us, that’s a gradual process. For others, a significant life event may reveal a deep hunger for solid food. My devotional life looks different from my mother’s—and no doubt my granddaughter Olivia’s will be different from mine.

My life’s journey has been very different from Mom’s too. One of the marked differences occurred when my three sons ranged in age from 12 to 18: the breakup of my marriage. Although one of the most painful periods in my life, that event also served as a real turning point.

It allowed transformation that I could never have imagined. It also set me on a path in my spiritual life that at first upended some of what I knew and believed.

Suddenly, knowing *about* God wasn’t enough. What I needed was a deepening *relationship with* the God who loved me unconditionally. How could this happen in my life? Why? What now? What would happen to me? To our sons? Where was God in all this?

I had so many unanswered questions. I experienced doubts—and, yes, anger at God. (Thankfully, a friend and work colleague assured me that God could handle my doubts and anger and that God still loved me dearly.) I learned the truth of what writer Anne Lamott says, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, it’s certainty.” Doubt didn’t seem to be such an enemy of faith after all—but perhaps more a part of the process of deepening it. At least it was for me.

### **A Hand Holding Mine**

My image of God as distant and stern father and judge didn’t work any longer either. For a long time I had no real image—only the sense of a hand holding mine. Bible study, prayer, and life’s other teachers widened my image of God and it now includes a much broader selection of biblical texts and snapshots, such as the mothering God suggested in

Isaiah 66:13: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” or the mother bear pictured in Hosea 13:8. God beyond gender. God not made in our human image. But *all* of us created in God’s image.

I see now that God is so much more than I had imagined—water when we thirst (Psalm 63) and rock when we need refuge (2 Samuel 22:1–2). And much more.

During those post-divorce years, Bible verses that had so easily rolled off my tongue before came up for question. Take Romans 8:28, for example: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” What? But I loved God. I thought I had been called to be wife and mother, missionary wife, pastor’s wife, daughter, friend, women’s group member and all the other roles I filled then. So what went wrong? I needed to delve more deeply into Scripture and try to see what was really being said.

It was also then that I experienced incredible pain and difficulty reading some of the Old Testament texts that included abusive treatment and attitudes toward women. I couldn’t read them without crying. I didn’t know what to do with them. One of the most difficult was the story of the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19. It’s still painful

to read. But it has also spurred me to raise my voice for justice for women. That and many other “texts of terror,” as they’re called, forced me to read the Bible with a historical perspective. When was the material written? What do we know about the time? The context can give perspective. It also served as a reminder that the people I met in the Bible were human—flawed and clay-footed just like me.

### The Things That Sustain

Simple answers to any of my post-divorce questions and pain didn’t work. I needed more of the solid food of faith. Thus began a real deepening of my spiritual life that continues to this day. It has meant deeper reading of the Bible, in all the ways suggested in the Women of the ELCA Bible study—devotional, historical, literary, and Lutheran theological. For me it included a two-year spiritual formation program, Grace Institute, where I learned new spiritual disciplines such as *Lectio Divina* mentioned in the Bible study.

The journey from the milk of faith to the solid food of faith awakened me to the importance of worshiping the God who is revealed in the Bible rather than making the Bible and some correct interpretation the focus of my belief. It caused me to ask more questions about how the particular books

that comprise the Bible came to be chosen for inclusion. I wanted to know more about the culture of the Bible; I wanted to dig deeper and experience Jesus as friend. I wanted a relationship with the God who calls me by name. Those were the things that would sustain me through life with its complexities and challenges.

Those are the things that did sustain me as Dad fought cancer and ultimately died, when we faced Mom’s dementia and death, when I was passed over twice for the editor’s position at *The Lutheran*, and when my job was eliminated there last fall.

My relationship with the One revealed in the Bible also adds to all the joys in my life: my three sons, their wives and my eight grandchildren; a new primary relationship—a gift at this stage of life; my extended family; deep and abiding friendships; the chance to re-create myself and reimagine work life and more.

### A Friend for Life

Moving from the milk of faith to solid food isn’t easy. We often need to let go of some cherished beliefs or ways of being so we can embrace new ones. Moving from milk to solid food often means wrestling with biblical texts, not unlike Jacob at the Jabbok (Genesis 32) wrestling with God. It means facing our doubts and our humanness—

because it is there that we meet the God who loves and sustains us. It is there that we see our need for Jesus.

The move from being bottle-fed or spoon-fed to being responsible for our own faith development means accountability. We cannot expect to grow if we don’t work at it. This means spending time with God—reading the Bible, praying, worshiping, participating in Bible studies and adult education and finding those spiritual disciplines that help us grow spiritually. It means opening our hearts and minds to new experiences and new learning.

I’m often reminded that life’s difficult experiences can be great teachers. But with the Bible as a friend through life, we move from milk to solid food. And together we can be bread for one another on our faith journey.

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for providing the milk for my spiritual faith, the foundation. And Olivia, I pray you will keep the Bible as your friend for life. Through that Book of books, you will deepen your relationship with the One who imagined you and gave you life, the One who is your Savior and dearest friend and the One who will be your guide and comforter throughout life.

May it be so for you, too. 🌸  
**Sonia C. Solomonson**, a freelance writer in Streamwood, Ill., is job-hunting and re-creating her work life.





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# UNITY GOD'S GIFT IN CHRIST

by Bishop Mark S. Hanson

"Discipleship is joy," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote. One of many joys I experience is the opportunity to see so many expressions of the unity we have in Christ. Commenting on the words in Psalm 133:1, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity;" Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, "We can correctly interpret the words 'in unity' and say 'when kindred live together through Jesus Christ.' For Jesus Christ alone is our unity."

## Unity is our calling and task

Earlier this year I accompanied an ELCA delegation on an ecumenical journey to visit Anglican, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic leaders, as well as leaders of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and World Council of Churches. During this trip I often referred to Dr. Ishmael Noko's greeting to our 2009 churchwide assembly. Dr. Noko, LWF executive secretary, recalled the deep suspicions between Lutherans from different sides of the Cold War who gathered in 1957 for a LWF assembly. He reminded our churchwide assembly that, "Our forebears in faith decided to do the most sensi-

ble thing under those circumstances and that is stay together. They did not forsake one another. . . . They understood that the Church is the body of Christ; and, therefore, not ours to dismember."

## Unity includes diversity

We still struggle with a dynamic that God's people have lived with for centuries: the interplay between unity and diversity, both of which are gifts from God.

During a Bible study last year, the LWF executive committee listened to Paul's words to the Corinthian community: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12). Led by New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing, we heard another, more literal, way of translating the original Greek text. "And all the members, *being* many, are one body..."

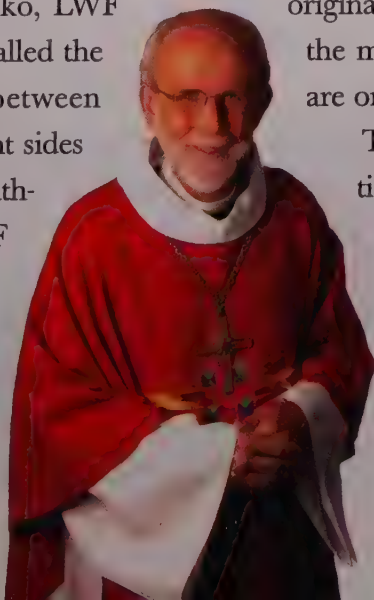
The NRSV translation of "*though* many" suggests that our "many-ness," or diversity, is a problem that compromises unity. We discovered, howev-

er, that within the body of Christ, being many—diversity—is unity's strength, not its weakness. When diversity becomes a problem, it's our human problem, not God's.

## Unity for the sake of mission

The world needs what we are when we are true to each other as sisters and brothers in the body of Christ—not when one partisan faction triumphs over another. This is far better than what happens too often in our culture—what writer Wendell Berry once described as a feud in which nobody remembers the cause but only what was last said or done by the other side. Our witness as a church requires us to engage one another from a position of mutual respect rather than from a position of advantage. Mutual respect is especially important in our accompaniment with global partners. We all are one in baptism, one in faith, one in Christ.

When we move beyond our comfortable, entrenched position, we experience each other in new ways. We grow in understanding and embody wisdom. We are not only truer to ourselves and our own convictions; we are truer to others and our love for them. We will become what we are called to be and gifted by the Holy Spirit to be—faithful members of the body of Christ. 🌿  
**The Rev. Mark S. Hanson** is the presiding bishop of the ELCA.





# Reading the Bible

by Linda Johnson Seyenkulo and Jensen Seyenkulo

## WORSHIP RESOURCES

**ELW** Evangelical Lutheran Worship (*also known as the red book*)

**LBW** Lutheran Book of Worship (*also known as the green book*)

**WOV** With One Voice (*also known as the blue book*)

**TFF** This Far By Faith (*also known as the African American hymnal*)

**LLC** Libro de Liturgia y Cántico (*also known as the Latino hymnal*)

**W&P** Worship and Praise (*also known as the contemporary hymnal*)

**Can two walk together, except they be agreed?**

Amos 3:3

## THEME VERSE

*"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."*

Romans 15:4

## MAIN TEXT

Romans 15:1–4

## Prayer

Almighty God, your Word has transforming powers. As we gather to seek understanding of your Word, we pray that you would allow us to experience your transformation among us and within us. We thank you for these sojourners whom you have sent to accompany us on this journey. Help us to see your Word come alive in them and through them. In the end, make us even more grateful for your Word. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## Song (*Select one*)

"Lord, Let my Heart Be Good Soil" *ELW* 512

"Listen, God is Calling" *ELW* 513

## OVERVIEW

The Christian Bible is a complex book or, better yet, a library of complex books. With its 66 books of various genres, it is a fascinating collection of materials. These books were written in ancient languages for ancient audiences of ancient cultures for the purpose of communicating to those people a love relationship between them and their God. How do we as a people in the 21st century—who also claim these books as ours—take them, read them, and make sense of them for our times? Scholars have suggested many ways. For this Bible study series we use the four methods proposed by the ELCA Book of Faith initiative: devotional, historical, literary, and Lutheran theological methods. (See "Learning to Read the Bible," p. 22.)

## Guidelines and Discussion Method for our Time Together

Our topic for this session is on how we read the Bible. To facilitate the discussion, we are going to adapt the rules of engagement and the invitation method of discussion, both of which you see on pages 29 and 30.

We will use these methods throughout this study so you may want to cut out that page. The rules of engagement and the invitation method of Bible study are referenced at the start of each session. Let's take time now to become acquainted with them.

### RULES OF ENGAGEMENT & INVITATION METHOD OF DISCUSSION

*We'll use these rules and methods throughout this study so cut out this page and have it handy for each session.*

The rules for engagement are adapted from the Sojourners' online community. Sojourners' is a Christian community that works for social and political justice, while inviting conversations about issues. Their guidelines for discussion are based on Bible references and the purpose is to invite discussion while maintaining respect for each other.

The invitation method of discussion from Eric Law's book, *The Wolf Shall Dwell With the Lamb*, is a way to conduct discussion so that everyone gets a chance to participate. It may feel a bit uncomfortable at first, but we ask you as a group to commit to staying with this process as we talk about the body of Christ.

#### RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

*Adapted from Sojourner's Community and from Pastors Jensen and Linda Johnson Seyenkulo*

> I will express myself with civility, courtesy, and respect for every member of the community, especially toward those with whom I disagree—even if I feel disrespected by them. (Romans 12:17–21)

> I will express my disagreements with other community members' ideas without insulting, mocking, or slandering them personally. (Matthew 5:22)

> I will not exaggerate others' beliefs nor make unfounded prejudicial assumptions based on labels, categories, or stereotypes. I will always extend the benefit of the doubt. (Ephesians 4:29)

> I will participate in community accountability by not talking about others' responses outside of the group and by listening respectfully to others whose opinions may differ from mine. (Proverbs 12:18)

In addition, we will add these two rules to our discussion:

> I will speak for myself and let others speak for themselves, listening to them when they do.

> We will practice the invitation to speak method of discussion. Everyone gets invited to speak once before others can speak.



In the invitation method of discussion adapted from Law's book, everyone gets invited to speak once before others can speak. The purpose of the discussion method is to provide a chance for everyone to speak. Sometimes in groups, there will be certain people who will control the discussion, often unintentionally. Law says from his research and observation that this is true particularly of groups where there are white people and people of color. It may be that your group is homogenous—everyone pretty much comes from the same cultural and racial background. Even then it will be true that some folks will talk more than others. This invitation method of discussion, which we have used in Bible studies, works well to make sure that everyone gets to participate and gets heard in the discussion.

*Here is how Eric Law describes the method:*

"I, as the leader, first share without projecting myself as an expert. After I have spoken, I then invite someone to share. I usually do not invite the person next to me because that might set up the precedent of going around in a circle. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege of inviting another to share. The person being invited has the option to "pass" if she does not want to say anything. After a person says "pass," he is still given the privilege to invite another to share. This continues until everybody has had a chance to share."  
(Eric Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell With the Lamb*.)



## The Bible: What it is and What We Know About it

Have a bowl or basket and some slips of paper available. Questions that are left unasked are questions left unanswered. If you have questions about the Bible, write them on a piece of paper. No one will write their name on the questions, so feel free to ask anything that is on your mind. Put your questions in a bowl. The entire group will try to find an answer to each selected question throughout the study.

1. Defining the Bible is not as easy as it sounds. It is one of the most difficult books that there is. Why?
2. Think about some of the most difficult books you have read. What makes those books difficult?
3. The Bible is difficult in some of the same ways as other difficult books. In what ways do you think the Bible is like the other difficult books you have identified?

The Bible shares some features with other books. It is a printed document that we read and in some cases is read to us. It has authors, chapters, settings, characters, plots, suspense, and purpose. It is a reference material that is quoted and studied.

However, it would be a mistake to place the Bible in the same category with other books. First and foremost is that for most people who read the Bible, it is *the* Book. For them the Bible is not just another book. It is neither fiction nor nonfiction, history nor science. It is all of this and more. About one-third of the world's population think of the Bible as *the* Book. God speaks to them through it. The Bible is in a class by itself!

We encounter another difficulty when we refer to the Bible as a book like any other book. With 66 total books, maybe we should call it the book of books.

## Understanding the Culture of the Bible

### READ LUKE 17:12-19.

4. Why would only one out of 10 cured lepers return to say thanks?
5. Why is it that the one who returns was actually an outsider whose outside status is emphasized by Luke?

The expression of gratitude is something we teach our children in this culture. Everyone knows that it is polite to say "thank you" when we receive a favor or are given a compliment. Well, when we say *everyone* in this context, we mean those who are steeped in our Western culture.

The 10 lepers who were healed lived in a culture different from ours today. Bruce Malina, in *Windows on the World of Jesus*, suggests that the setting of this story—first century Mediterranean world—was one in which gratitude was understood differently than we understand it. "Thank you" in that world meant "enough, no more" especially when used to express gratitude to one who is a social equal. The nine who did not return to say thanks did so because they felt they might need Jesus again so why say or do something that would eliminate that opportunity? The stranger who returns to say thanks is one who knows *this is it*. He had no recourse to Jesus, but more importantly, he knew the healing he received from Jesus was all he needed. He could express gratitude because he knew there was no need for a second dose of healing.

6. Think of biblical stories you have difficulty understanding. Can you name a couple?
7. The importance of the Bible to Christians cannot be overemphasized. Some believe without the Bible there would be no Christianity. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?



The Bible is very dense. Aside from this richness, most Christians, including Lutherans, will say the Bible is the Word of God. Through it the Holy Spirit speaks to God's people, bringing new things to light for the benefit of God's people and God's creation.

### **The Bible and Our Childish Faith (Milk)**

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he compared the Word to milk (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). At this point Paul is frustrated with his relationship with the Corinthian church. The men and women of God in Corinth are still immature in their faith. They are drinking the milk of faith rather than moving on to solid food. It is okay to feed on milk, which is something we do in Sunday school. But there comes a time when we have to switch to solid food. (See "What I Learned in Sunday School," p. 18.)

I've heard people say, "All I ever needed to know about the Bible I learned in Sunday school." Well, the things we learned in Sunday school form the foundation of our belief in the Bible and thus the foundation of our faith. If you didn't go to Sunday school, you learned about the Bible someplace else. There are things we learn when we are very young, we question later in life. Sometimes there are things about the Bible that we begin to wonder about during the Sunday school years. But, we may not ask because we have been taught that it is inappropriate to question the Bible. We may also hesitate to ask questions early on because we fear appearing ill-informed. Or we were too shy to ask.

8. What are some solid teachings from Sunday school or your childhood that have stayed with you all these years? What are some questions you had about the Bible when you were young? Which questions got answered to your satisfaction? Which questions were not?

9. What did you do then or have you done now about your questions about the Bible?

Many things we learn in Sunday school stay with us and form the basis of our faith. Sometimes our love and respect for the Bible is learned through songs. There is something about songs and singing that make learning fun. Do you remember the lyrics: "The B-I-B-L-E – yes, that's the book for me"? The Bible happens to be one of the first words children in some countries learn to spell even before they can spell their own names. For them, the Bible is up there with R-I-C-E, their staple nutritional source.

10. Do you remember when you learned to spell the word *Bible*? What are some words you learned to spell early? What do such words mean to you?

### **Bible as Friend**

Some feminist theologians have compared the Christian's relationship to the Bible with the kind of friendships that are most common among women. While a friend can be made in an instant, a deep, life-sustaining friendship takes time to develop. In the same way, spending time with the Bible develops a trusting relationship that enables the individual to lean on it in times of need. This relationship begins at the milk stage for most of us. One of the surest ways to develop this relationship is to commit verses to memory. (See "A Friend Through Life's Passages," p. 22.)

11. Did you commit Bible verses to memory in Sunday school? Why? What reasons were given? Was it important to you then and is it important to you now? Can you still say one of them?

## READ 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1–2 AND HEBREWS

12:12–14.

12. What are these authors' ideas of solid food? When do you think one is ready for solid food?

Out of frustration, Paul writes to the Corinthian church that they are not deserving of solid food. In his estimation, these are people who should be mature enough, but the news reaching him about their behavior tells him they are not.

## Benefiting From the Nutrients: The Book of Faith

In this Bible study, we will be dealing with solid food as we discuss difficult or uncomfortable topics like the body of Christ, stewardship, spiritual gifts, worship, race and culture, loving relationships, barriers to resurrection and evangelism. To look at these topics we will be using the ELCA Book of Faith methods which invite us to do so through four lenses or reading approaches: devotional, historical, literary, and Lutheran theological.

## DEVOTIONAL READING

Devotional reading invites us to read the Bible devotionally or as a meditation. The Book of Faith Initiative suggests several ways to do so. Through this series we will use three methods, *Lectio Divina* (or Sacred Reading), TRIP, and SPECK.

**LECTIO DIVINA.** There are four steps in this method.

- Reading or listening to the text.
- Meditating on the text.
- Responding with prayer.
- Contemplating and sitting quietly in the presence of God.

**TRIP.** This method encourages us to take a trip through the text or verse exploring its impact on us.

- THANKS:** What in this passage makes me thankful?
- REGRET:** What in this passage causes me regret?
- INTERCESSION:** What does the text lead me to pray for?
- PLAN OF ACTION:** What action does the text encourage me to take?

**C. SPECK.** The third and final method we use for the devotional reading encourages us to ask different sets of questions of the text.

- S** – Does the passage reveal any **sin** that I need to confess?
- P** – Is there any **promise** in the text that I need to claim?
- E** – Is there any **example** to follow?
- C** – Is there any **command** to obey?
- K** – Is there any **knowledge** to gain?

**READ ROMANS 15:1–4.** Select one method from above, and apply it to the text.

## HISTORICAL READING

This approach is an attempt to discover as much as we can about the world from which the material was written. Our world is different from the world in which the Bible was formed. In order to make sense of its message we need to explore the socio-political world of the time.

The kind of questions we ask determine the kind of answers we get. Generic questions most often lead to generic answers and intentional, thoughtful questions produce thoughtful answers. Historical reading sets out to ask more thoughtful questions of the text in order to get as close to the original meaning as possible.

The question we usually ask of the text (What does this mean?) may have a place in the study of Scripture but in many ways it is similar to the generic question (How are you?) As important as it is to know what the text means in relationship to us, we want to know what it is saying in its own context. The better understanding we have of the text in its original setting, the better we are able to interpret it and apply it to our situation.



**READ ROMANS 15:1–4 AGAIN.** Your leader will pose a number of questions from a historical reading perspective and you will apply it to the text. Here are some of the questions:

- Who is the writer? What do we know about him or her?
- Who is the audience? What do we know about them?
- When was the material written? What can we uncover about this time?
- Do we know anything about the period that might help cast light on the text?
- Where was the text written? Anything about the context that might have influenced the author?
- Why was the text written? What is the situation being addressed?

### LITERARY READING

Literary reading is the method that allows us to look at the text as is—how it is written, how it conveys meaning, and how it may have been (or is) heard. With this approach, the questions that are asked are related to the text. The readers, you and I, are curious about authorship, historical setting, the language, and content of the text. Just as we have found in the case of historical reading, there are questions that help the reader get answers to these issues.

- What is the overall plot of this story and does this text fit in the overall plot?
- Who are the characters and what do we know about these characters?
- What are the important settings in the text? This question invites us to consider special, temporal, and social settings.
- What are the themes? Does it deal with violence, power, election, and morality?
- What are the various points of view?

Maybe the narrator and/or God have a point of view. What is it?

**FOR A THIRD TIME, READ ROMANS 15:1–4.** Select one set of questions above and apply it to the text. Share your experience.

### LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL READING

The Book of Faith initiative is clear on the fact that Lutherans read the Bible wearing unique lenses that help them ask the Bible questions that other Christians may not think of asking. While we share with most other Christians the first three reading methods previously discussed, the Lutheran theological reading is a point of view from which Lutherans read the Bible. We act as detectives looking for certain clues.

For the last exercise of the day, take one of these lenses as outlined below, and apply it to Romans 15:1–4:

#### *Law and Gospel*

Lutherans are big on law and gospel. When we read the Bible we ask, “How does this text highlight God’s expectations of us? Does the text help us see our shortcomings in the presence of God? What is God’s grace in the text? Does the text offer good news of forgiveness or promise?” The first two questions are law-related and the second set is gospel-related.

#### *What Shows Forth Christ?*

Understanding that Christ is the core, the central message of the Bible leads us to search ways that the text reveals him to us. We therefore ask questions like; in what ways does this text point us to Christ? How does the text prepare us for Christ?

#### *Scripture Interprets Scripture*

Although there are individual books that convey different aspects of God’s involvement with creation, we do not read passages in isolation. Rather, we try to see

How other parts of Scripture can help us understand the particular text we are dealing with. To do so, we ask several questions: What other passages are there in Scripture that help us understand or interpret this text? Are there important themes that help us put this passage in the perspective of the whole? How important is this passage in light of our convictions about what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ?

### **The Plain Meaning of the Text**

We ask the kind of questions that help us place the text in its original context. Our questions relate to what the text might have meant to its original audience. We ask questions such as: What is the plain meaning of this text? Are we giving the text its own integrity?

### **Public Interpretation**

For Lutherans, interpretation of Scripture is a public act. We believe the Bible is God's word to all of God's creation. The whole word of God is for the whole people of God. So we ask questions such as: Does our interpretation have a general meaning that could apply to everyone? Are we learning lessons from the text that others might also hear and that we can explain? Are there interpretations from other cultures that might broaden and lend depth to our reading?

### **BEFORE YOU GO**

We have discussed some useful tools for the study of Scripture. For some of you these may be reminders and for others these are new concepts. Wherever you are on this journey, we invite you to open the Book of Faith (the Bible) and let the Spirit reveal God's plan for you and for the people God has placed on your path.

### **DIGGING DEEPER**

During fellowship time, take the time to share with each other what resources you have. Do any of you have study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, concordances, or commentaries? Ask your pastor (or church librarian) for resources that may assist you in your study.

### **CLOSING**

#### **Prayer**

You have gathered us and nourished us with your Word, O God. We thank you for this your generous and unselfish act. Enable us to hunger more for your Word so that we are better equipped to serve you and the people you send our way. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

#### **SONG** (*Select one*)

"Thy Word Is a Lamp" *TFF* 132, *W&P* 144

"God's Word is Our Great Heritage" *ELW* 509, *LBW* 239

### **LOOKING AHEAD**

The human body with its various parts is the image that Paul compares the church to. As diverse as the parts of the human body are they function together for the good of the body. In the human body we find unity in diversity. In preparation for the next session you may want to become familiar with Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 12. 🌿

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**To see video introductions for the Bible study sessions, go to [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org).**



# Getting Husbands to Church

by Doug Haugen



Sally was very committed to the LORD and to our congregation. Her husband, Bob, was an agnostic with little time for the church. He attended worship with Sally at Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day because he knew that it was important to her. While she had many friends at church, he knew no one.

But Bob loved softball, so my church's men's softball team invited him to join. Softball was much more than a game to our church; it was a way to build relationships with men who were active in church and those who were not. We would go out for refreshments after the game, and made sure we got together during the off-season. After playing softball with us, Bob discovered he had more in common with us "church guys" than he thought, and we became friends. Eventually he felt safe enough in those friendships to freely explore the questions he had about faith.

Today Sally is a licensed minister in the congregation and Bob is a supportive spouse. I believe the church men's softball team had something to do with that.

If you are a woman who regularly attends worship without your husband, you are not alone. According to statistics, about 5 million women in America worship on a regular basis without their spouses. (2000 U.S. Census and Pollster George Barna's year 2000 stats found in the book, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* by David Murrow, Nelson Books, 2005.)

The participation of men in mainline churches has been declining since the early 1950s. In 1952, the percentage of men and women worshipping in the United States was 47 percent and 53 percent, respectively; mirroring male/female demographics, according to Lyle Schaller, an author and church growth consultant. According to an ELCA study, the percentage of men worshipping in our congregations is 38 percent. And in some congregations, that percentage is even lower.

What is keeping men away from church? What can congregations do about it? And what can you do if your husband is one who is missing?

## MINISTRY WITH MEN

Barna's research group did a study in the early 1990s and found that: 1) men want to understand how faith connects to their everyday life; 2) they are seeking significant relationships with other men; and 3) fathers are searching for quality instruction and a positive Christian experience for their children, even if that was not part of their experience growing up.

The pastor (whether female or male) is key in ministry with men. Lutheran Men in Mission (LMM) encourages pastors to make a point of visiting with men outside the church building. If possible, have lunch with them where they work. Get to know what their world is like. Participate with them on a project or sporting event. Men will usually not come to the pastor's office for help and support. But they appreciate seeing the pastor as "a real person" and will talk over a cup of coffee or while engaged in an activity together.

LMM also encourages pastors to connect regularly with a small group of men (churched and unchurched)

talk about the text they will use for their Sunday sermon. It's best if they meet somewhere other than the church building. Pastors can ask the men for their stories regarding the text. The stories help the pastor engage the men during the sermon. The Word will eventually get around to what the pastor can relate to men.

Congregational leaders should try to communicate the faith through sermons or Bible studies without using church jargon. Men's ministry leaders can create opportunities for men to safely gather to build friendships. Some of those could be building projects, fishing trips, and retreats.

One of the things my friend Bob appreciated about our congregation was that we had a good program for his young son. Fathers want a good experience for their children. Make sure that your congregation has a strong program for children and young people—and don't be afraid to involve the fathers.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Every individual and relationship is different, and it would be difficult to pinpoint exactly what you should say or do to interest your husband at church, but here are some ideas to consider:

Be aware of his possible discomfort to be in an unfamiliar place and where women outnumber

men. Also, many men are intimidated by programs that dig into the Bible.

- Begin by suggesting activities at church that might interest him.
- Let him know *why* worship and faith are important to you; he already knows you would like him to accompany you to church.
- Ask one of the men in your congregation's men's group to ask your husband to an activity outside the church building. This might be a service project like Habitat for Humanity or a sporting event. If he goes, he'll know some men at church the next time he attends services with you.

Reaching the husbands of faithful wives should be the highest priority of your church's men's ministry.

## LUTHERAN MEN IN MISSION

The vision of Lutheran Men in Mission is for every man to have a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ through an effective men's ministry in every congregation. The mission, by God's grace, is to build

men's faith, relationships, and ministry through events, the resources we produce, and ongoing leadership development.

Our primary resource is the *Master Builders Bible for Men*. Many men are intimidated by Bible study, afraid of looking foolish or having the wrong answer. This Bible contains 20,000 study questions designed to be non-threatening and help people in small groups get to know each other as they get to know God. The 60 "felt need" courses in the Bible include six on marriage (including one entitled "Spiritually Single: Solo on Sundays"). Additionally, a leader's guide is included in the *Master Builders Bible for Men*, so it could be the only resource many men's ministry leaders need.

When Women of the ELCA and Lutheran Men in Mission work together to make disciples who act boldly, the entire congregation and community benefit. We are glad to be in ministry with our sisters in Christ. ☞

**Doug Haugen** is director for Lutheran Men in Mission for the ELCA Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission unit.

Lutheran Men in Mission is conducting *Building Men for Christ* training events throughout the country. In these events congregational leaders (female and male, rostered and lay) learn how to connect with five types of men (including the unchurched spouse of a member) and leave equipped to develop a plan to disciple men into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. Contact [Doug.Haugen@elca.org](mailto:Doug.Haugen@elca.org) to find out more. To learn about LMM and its resources, go to [www.elca.org/LMM](http://www.elca.org/LMM).



# For Peace in God's World by Victor Thasiah

- A TIME OF VISION
- THE GOD OF PEACE
- THE CHURCH, A COMMUNITY OF PEACE
- FAITH IN GOD'S WORLD
- POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY
- TASKS

This ELCA social statement and accompanying study guide are available for free download at [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements). You can order a free printed copy online at that address or by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2996.

Present-day fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other places, and soldiers returning home from war continue to remind us that as much as we desire peace, it's a challenge to attain. To remember the church's calling to be a peacemaker and explore what international peace means, the ELCA adopted a social statement in 1995 titled "For Peace in God's World." The text attempts to strengthen the ELCA's global perspective in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

According to the statement, the church's vocation is peacemaking. "God's final peace, the peace of God's eternal reign" serves as the basis of this calling, which has two main expressions: 1) proclaiming the gospel of God's final peace; and 2) working for earthly peace—that is, "relationships among and with nations that are just, harmonious, and free from war."

Affirming that God creates and preserves us for community (making earthly peace possible), the statement views sin as destroying community. The text sets out God's resolve for peace, embodied in the people of Israel, who were chosen to be a blessing to all and through whom God promises a reign of justice and peace. Jesus Christ is the

fulfillment of this promise, bringing this very peace. The statement explains, "Jesus taught love for one's enemies; he reached out to the oppressed, downtrodden, and rejected of the earth; he prayed for his enemies while himself being rejected on the cross; [and] above all, through Jesus' violent death, God redeemed the world..."

In this way, the big picture is life in community with God and one another. "The God of peace suffers with and for a suffering and sinful world so that all of creation will enjoy the loving community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

How does this affect us? "The Gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15) heals our broken relationship with God, removing the ultimate root of violence and injustice. The Gospel breaks down the dividing walls of hostility among people, creates a new humanity—making Christ Jesus 'our peace' (Ephesians 2:13–22)—and promises the reconciliation of all things in Christ."

It is this promise that the Holy Spirit uses to call and gather "a people from all nations to worship and witness to the God of peace." This public gathering to proclaim and celebrate God's peace is identified as the church's unique contribution to peace. "In praying for

peace in the world, in interceding for all who suffer from war and injustice and for those in authority, the Church acts for peace.”

## PEACEMAKING PRESENCE

The church also contributes to earthly peace by equipping the faithful to act for peace within and outside the Christian community. The church does the latter as “a presence for peace that disturbs, reconciles, serves, and deliberates.”

Concerning political responsibility, the statement advocates that governments should “vigorously pursue” less coercive measures over more coercive ones: “consent over compulsion, nonviolence over violence, diplomacy over military engagement, and deterrence over war.”

Though the statement focuses throughout on peacemaking, it also includes an important section on deciding about wars: “While permitting recourse to war in exceptional circumstances, these principles intend to limit such occasions by setting forth conditions that must be met to render military action justifiable. We begin with a strong presumption against all war; support for and participation in a war to restore peace is a tragic concession to a sin-

ful world. Any decision for war must be a mournful one . . . The principles for deciding about wars include right intention, justifiable cause, legitimate authority, last resort, declaration of war aims, proportionality, and reasonable chance of success. The principles for conducting war include noncombatant immunity and proportionality. The principles for post-war conduct include showing mercy to the defeated and assisting them to rebuild.”

In addition to these principles, the rejection of nuclear war, and support for “selective conscientious objection,” the statement acknowledges the importance of Christian pacifism. “This church today needs the witness of its members who in the name of Jesus Christ refuse all participation in war, who commit themselves to establish peace and justice on earth by nonviolent power alone, and who may suffer and die in their discipleship . . . We must continue the perennial discussion in the Church universal about whether Christian love and discipleship prohibit participation in war in all circumstances, or whether they may permit it in some circumstances.”

What should we do to keep and build international peace today?

The text concludes with tasks:

- Foster a dynamic vision of difference in unity.
- Promote respect for human rights.
- Counter and transform attitudes that encourage violence.
- Strengthen the will and ability to resolve conflicts peacefully.
- Insist that peace and economic justice belong together.
- Support just arrangements to regulate the international economy.
- Revitalize economic assistance to poorer nations.
- Evaluate carefully the balance between legitimate security needs and other priority uses of government revenues, and reduce military expenditures wherever necessary.
- Strengthen international cooperation.
- Improve structures of common security.
- Give high priority to arms control and reduction.
- Control and reduce the arms trade.
- Advocate participatory and accountable political structures within nations.
- Encourage non-governmental organizations and their work for peace.
- Encourage and support nonviolent action.
- Care for the uprooted. ☸

Victor Thasiah is assistant director for studies in ELCA Church in Society.



*rooted and grounded in love*



Make a planned gift to  
Women of the ELCA  
and leave a legacy for  
women who will follow  
in your footsteps.

*And that Christ may dwell in your  
hearts through faith, as you are  
being rooted and grounded in love.  
(Ephesians 3:17)*

See the postcard in this issue of *Lutheran Woman Today* to receive more information  
about planned giving options to Women of the ELCA.

Women <sup>of the</sup> ELCA 



## GRACE NOTES

# Extending the Invitation

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



In this month's issue, you're reading about the ELCA Book of Faith initiative and learning about it from different perspectives. This initiative invites the whole church to become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture.

A primary purpose of the Book of Faith initiative is to get people in our church to study the Bible so that we might more fully live into our baptismal calls.

That's nothing new for Women of the ELCA! Women in our organization have years, even decades, of personal history in studying Scripture. Many women have come together month after month to gather in Bible study and support one another through the joys and trials of everyday living. I know women who have been gathering for Bible study for more than 40 or even 50 years. When my husband's grandmother was no longer able to live independently and moved into a nursing home, her circle would come to the home for its Bible study so she could continue to participate.

The more mobile among us aren't at a loss for Bible study either. I've been part of Bible study groups in each of the four congregations where we've been members. Some of us participate in Internet-based studies such as real-time discussions or blog-based explorations. Some of us discuss the Bible via social networking such as Facebook.

Women in our organization have much to share with the larger church about our Bible study experiences. We can tell of the transforming power of

the word when women come together regularly for study. We can describe the mutual support and encouragement that comes from others who study the word together. We know what it's like to live out our baptismal call, supported by the study of Scripture.

If those in your congregation who are engaged in Book of Faith initiative conversations don't ask you first, make sure you talk with them about your Bible study experiences.

As you begin the program year with our new study, "The People of God: Unity in the Midst of Diversity," pause to consider these questions. Within your congregation, who might you invite to participate in the monthly study? Within your family, who might you invite to participate? Within your neighborhood or workplace? What difference could you make by meeting at a different time or in a different location? How many other women would be available to participate in your study if you changed your usual routine?

If each of us extended an invitation to at least one woman to participate in Bible study with us, imagine that expanded circle. And what lively discussion could follow!

So, extend that invitation. Offer to provide transportation. Give a gift subscription to the magazine. Sit with your invitee, introduce her to others in your group. Repeat it again next month and the month after that. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.





AMEN!

## The Wonder of This Book

by Catherine Malotky

**This book, God, is a** mystery. I count myself blessed to have grown up with it. I learned the stories in my youngest days, read at bedtime in my mother's arms. Later, on Sunday mornings in Mrs. Walton's classroom, I explored them with crayons and glue. And still later, I played Bible Baseball around my grandparents' dinner table.

Eventually I learned to tell the stories myself, reading and sharing. Then, my love took me deeper into these stories, because as I read them again and again, I saw things I'd not seen or heard before, and questions grew up. Questions like:


- Why did God kill the Egyptians' first-born children the night of the Passover, and later, drown the Egyptians soldiers in the Red Sea? (Exodus 12-14) Would the story have been different if the Egyptians had been the ones who wrote the story?
- Why did Lot offer his virgin daughters to the mob from Sodom, the mob that sought to ravage his sojourning guests? (Genesis 19) Would the story have been interpreted differently if women had been the ones who studied it over the centuries?
- Why did the women leave the empty tomb and say nothing to anyone at the end of the Gospel of Mark? Why did the other gospel writers tell a different story about the reaction of the women? What can I learn about the Bible, just from this?

Sometimes, my questions frightened me. I wondered about who God was, and how God could love me. What if I was

the bad guy in the story that someday would be told? What if God is vindictive or callous, as God seems to be on the surface in stories like Job's?

But each question drew me deeper if I could be open and not fall into cynicism or fear. Through my doubt, the Spirit invited me in even more. And the deeper I get, the more opens to me. In faith, I see blessings like:

- The wonder of God's breath filling my lungs every time I breathe, just as God breathed into the first human the breath of life (Genesis 2:7).
- Jesus' promise to be with me, no matter what, as he promised his disciples (Matthew 28:20).
- The beauty of the imagery of baptism, being born of God, carried and cleansed into new life, as Jesus explained to the earnest Nicodemus (John 3). I cannot help but think of the wonder of amniotic fluid cleansing my not-yet-born daughters, and how those waters broke, making their passage into the world easier.

Thank you, God, for the wonder of this book, these books. Thank you for the record of faith, the hope of generations of those who sought you. Thank you for this witness. Open me to learn, to question, to be drawn in. Make me eager to understand, and patient to wait for understanding. In Jesus' name. Amen. 

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky** serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been a editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



The People of God:  
Unity in the Midst of Diversity



LEADER GUIDE  
A Bible study of Women of the ELCA

## Begin the 2010–11 Bible study with a ritual

When you start your new *Lutheran Woman Today* Bible study this month, perhaps you or your group would like to begin with a prayerful ritual. As we gather to begin the "People of God: Unity in the Midst of Diversity" study, we can thank God together. Use the five-minute ritual found on the [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org) website under the Bible study tab. You will find it with the first session, "The Book of Faith," available for free download.

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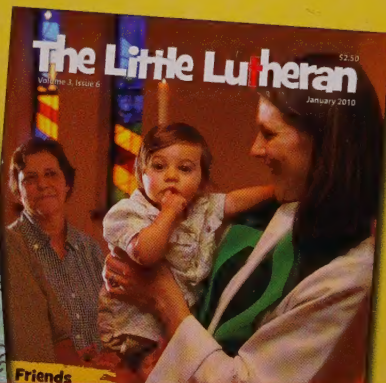
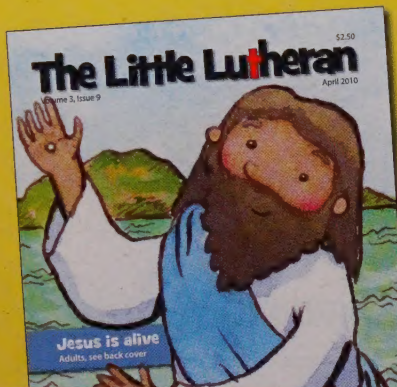
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# Share the gift of faith

**W**hat gift did you last give your grandchild, godchild or child? A toy truck? A doll? Why not send "mail from Jesus"? That's what

Zoe Spaid-Crow calls *The Little Lutheran*. She gets a sturdy, colorful magazine 10 times a year. The staff of *The Lutheran* pours Bible stories, prayers, songs and activities for children 6 and younger into each issue, so Zoe and others can come to know Jesus as their savior and friend.

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